

The Travelogue to the Four Jhanas

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This morning the talk is going to be on **Right Concentration**, Right Samadhi, on the four jhanas which I promised to talk about earlier this week and about exactly what they are, how to get into them, so one can recognise them after they've arisen and also to understand their place in the scheme of things. If one ever looks at the Buddha's teachings - the Suttas - one finds that the word 'jhana' is mentioned very, very often. There is a common theme, which occurs in almost every teaching of the Buddha and is part of the eightfold path - **Samma Samadhi - Right Concentration**, which is always defined as '*cultivating the four jhanas*.' In this meditation retreat, if we are really talking about meditation and we want to cultivate meditation, there is no reason why we shouldn't aim to cultivate the jhana states, because they give a depth to one's meditation which one can experience as something quite special and one could also experience the power of these states as well as the bliss of these states. It is that quality of bliss and that quality of power which you will later be able to use to really develop the powerful insights into the nature of your mind and the nature of all phenomena. I shall begin by talking about the Buddha's own story which is related in the Suttas. He attained jhana almost by chance as a young boy sitting under a rose-apple tree, just watching while his father was doing some ceremony. It was a very pleasurable experience and what the Buddha, or the Buddha-to-be, remembered was just the pleasure of that experience and a little bit about its power. But like many people, like many meditators, many practitioners, he formed the wrong view that anything so pleasurable can have nothing at all to do with ending suffering and enlightenment, that something so pleasurable must be a cause for more attachment in this world. It was because of thoughts like these that for six years the Buddha just wandered around the forests of India doing all sorts of ascetic practices. In other words almost looking for suffering, as if through suffering you could find an end of suffering. It was only after six years of futility that the Buddha decided, having had a meal, and this is how it is actually said in the Suttas, that he recalled this pleasurable experience of the first jhana as a young boy, maybe he said "this might be the path to enlightenment." and the insight knowledge arose in him, "This **is** the path to enlightenment, to **Bodhi**." Because of that insight, the Buddha, as everyone knows, sat under the Bodhi tree, developed the jhanas and based on the power of that jhana, the clarity of that jhana, developed all of these wisdoms, first of all recollecting past lives, recollecting the action of kamma, the depth of kamma, how it sends beings to various parts of rebirth, and then lastly the Four Noble Truths.

It was only because of the power of that sort of mind that he could penetrate to such a degree of subtlety and uncover things which had been clouded completely from him. Since then he always tried to teach and encourage the practice of jhana as an essential ingredient of the Eightfold Path, an essential part of becoming enlightened. If one wishes to use Buddhism not as only a half-hearted path but to take it to its fullness, and aim for enlightenment, then sooner or later one will have to come across these jhanas, cultivate them, get to know them and use their power and do exactly the same as the Buddha did and become fully enlightened.

Many of the other talks which monks give tell you about the problem of suffering in existence, they tell you about the difficulties of life and the problems of rebirth and more death, but I think its also our responsibility, if we are going to tell you the problem, then we must tell you the solution as well and tell you the solution in all its detail, not holding anything back. Part of that solution, an essential part of that solution is developing these things which we call jhana.

Now what these jhanas actually are - I'll just talk about the four jhanas this morning and I'm going to carry on from what I might call the launching pad of that second stage of meditation which I've been talking about a lot while I've been teaching meditation during this retreat. The second stage of meditation in my scheme of things is where you have full continuous awareness of the breath. So the mind is not distracted at all, every moment it has the breath in mind and that state has been stabilised with continual attention until the breath is continually in mind, no distraction for many minutes on end. That's the second stage in this meditation. It coincides with the third stage in the Buddha's Anapanasati Sutta,

where the meditator experiences whole body of breath, where the body here is just a word for the accumulation of all the parts of an inbreath, all the parts of an outbreath and the sequential awareness of these physical feelings. The next stage, the third stage in my scheme, the fourth stage in the Buddha's Anapanasati Sutta, is where, having attained that second stage and not letting it go, not letting go of the awareness of the breath one moment, one calms that object down, calms the object of the breath down.

There are several ways of doing that. Perhaps the most effective is just developing an attitude of letting go, because the object of the breath will calm down naturally if you leave it alone. However, sometimes some meditators have difficulty letting go to that degree and so another method which can be very effective is just suggesting calm, calm, calm. Or suggesting letting go. There is a great difference between the attitude of letting go and suggesting letting go. With suggesting letting go, you are still actually controlling things, you are getting involved in it but at least you are getting involved by sending it in the right direction, sending it towards the place where the attitude of letting go is occurring, without the need to put it into words or to give it as orders or commands. You are programming the mind in the right direction. But I use both, either just letting go as an attitude of mind or subconscious suggesting, just calm, calm, calm.

and to feel the object of your attention, being here the feeling of the breath, get more and more refined, more subtle. The difficulty or the problem here will be that you have to always maintain your attention clearly on the breath. In other words, not letting go of the second stage when you develop the third stage. Keep full awareness of the breath, but just make that breath softer and softer and softer, more and more subtle, more and more refined, but never letting go of it. As the breath gets more and more refined, the only way of not letting go of it is by treating it very, very gently. You're going towards an effortless awareness on the breath, an effortless attention where the breath is just there.

A bit of a problem here with many meditators is that they are not quite sure of the correct way of knowing the breath in this state. There is a type of knowing which is just knowing, being mindful of, without naming, without thinking, without analysing, a sub-verbal type of knowing. You have to be confident that you are actually watching the breath. Sometimes you may not have the width of mind to know exactly what type of breath you are watching, but you know you are watching the breath. The point is, it's a type of knowing which is getting much more refined. Our usual knowing is very wide and full of many details. Here, the details are narrowing down until a point comes where sometimes we have so few details that we don't know if we truly know, a different type of knowing, a much more refined knowing. So the wisdom has to be very strong here and confidence has to be strong, to understand that one still knows the breath. The breath hasn't disappeared at all and you do not need, as it were, to widen the width of knowing through effort of will, this will just disturb the mind. Just allow everything to calm down. The object will calm down and so will the knowing start to calm down. It's at this stage where you start to get a samadhi nimitta arising. I call this part of the third stage.

If you calm the physical feeling of breath down, the mental feeling of breath starts to arise -- the **samadhi nimitta** -- usually a light which appears in the mind. However, it can sometimes just appear to be a physical feeling. It can be a deep peacefulness; it can even be like a blackness. The actual description of it is very wide simply because the description is that which everyone adds on to a core experience, which is a mental experience. When it starts to arise you just haven't got the words to describe it. So what we add to it is usually how we understand it to ourselves. Darkness, peacefulness, profound stillness, emptiness, a beautiful light or whatever. Don't particularly worry about what type of nimitta it actually is.

If you want to know the way to develop that nimitta, then this fourth stage of developing the four jhanas is to pay attention to that aspect of the nimitta which is beautiful, which is attractive, which is joyful, the pleasant part of it. And again, it is at this stage where you have to be comfortable with pleasure and not be afraid of it, not fear that it is going to lead to some sort of attachment, because the pleasure of these stages can be very intense at times, literally overpowering: overpowering your sense of self, overpowering your control, overpowering your sensitivity to your physical body. So you have to look for that pleasure and happiness which is in the nimitta, and this becomes the fourth stage because once the mind has noticed the pleasure and happiness in the nimitta, that will act like what I call the magnet or the glue. It is that which will draw one's attention onto it, and it's not the will or the choice or the decision which takes the attention and puts it onto the samadhi nimitta. In fact once the choice, the intention, the orders inside yourself arise, they'll actually push you away. You have to let the whole process work because the samadhi nimitta at this stage is very pleasurable; it literally pulls the mind into it. Many meditators when they possibly experience their first taste of a jhana, experience the mind falling into a beautiful hole. And that's exactly what's happening. It's the joy, the bliss, the beauty of that nimitta which is before the mind that actually pulls the mind into it. So you don't need to do the pushing, you don't need to do the work. At this stage it becomes a natural process of the mind. Your job is just to get to that second stage, calm that breath down, allow the samadhi nimitta to arise. Once the samadhi nimitta arises strongly, then the jhana happens in and of itself.

Again, because the quality of knowing is very strong but very narrow in these states, while you are in these states, there is no way that you can truly assess where you are and what's happening to you. The ability to know through thinking, through analysing, is taken away from you in these states. You usually have to wait until you emerge from these states, until your ordinary thinking returns again, so you can really look back upon and analyse what has happened. Any of these jhana states are powerful experiences and as a powerful experience, they leave a deep imprint on your mind.

Unfortunately there is not a word in our English language which corresponds to a positive trauma. The word 'trauma' is like a very strong negative, painful experience which leaves its imprint in you. This is similar in its strength and result to a trauma and you remember it very clearly because it has a severe impact on your memory. However, these are just purely pleasant experiences, like pleasant traumas, and as such you recall them very easily. So after you've emerged from a jhana, it's usually no problem at all just to look back with the question, "what was that?" and to be able to see very clearly the type of experience, the object, which you were aware of for all this time and then you can analyse it. It's at this point that you can find out exactly where you were and what was happening, but in the jhana you can't do this.

After the jhana, one can know it by what the Buddha called '*the jhana factors*'. These are the major signposts which tell you what particular states you've been in. It's good to know those signposts but remember, these are just signposts to these states, these are the main features of these states and in the first jhana there are many subsidiary features. In fact the first jhana is quite wide. However, if it's a first jhana experience it has to have the five main features, the five main jhana factors. The second jhana is much narrower, much easier to find out whether this is where you've been. It's the same with the third and the fourth jhana, they get narrower still. The width of description for this experience, which you may offer, narrows down as you attain more profound depths of letting go.

But with the first jhana, the Buddha gave it five factors. The main factors are the **two** which is **piti-sukka**. This is bliss. Sometimes, if you look in books about the meaning of these terms, they will try and split them into separate factors. They are separate things, but in the first couple of jhanas piti and sukka are so closely intertwined that you will not be able to

distinguish one from the other and it's more helpful not to try, but to look at these two factors as just 'bliss'. That's the most accurate description which most people can recognise: "This is bliss." The Buddha called it **vivekaja piti-sukka**, that particular type of bliss which is born from detachment, born from aloofness, born from seclusion. Viveka is the word for 'seclusion', 'aloofness', 'separateness' and it means 'separated from the world of the five senses'. That's what you've separated yourself from and this is the bliss of that separation, which is the cause of that happiness and bliss. And that bliss has a particular type of taste which other blisses do not share, it is the bliss of seclusion. That is why it is also sometimes called the bliss of renunciation. You've renounced those things; therefore you are secluded from them.

There are two other factors which confuse people again and again. They are the two terms '**vitakka**' and '**vicira**' -- which Bikkhu Bodhi in his *Majima Nikaya* translates as 'initial' and 'sustained' application of thought or 'initial' and 'applied' thought. However, it should be known and recognised, that thinking, as you normally perceive it, is not present in these jhanas at all. That which we call thought has completely subsided. What these two terms refer to is a last vestige of the movement of the mind which, if it was continued, would give rise to thinking. It is almost what you might call sub-verbal thought. It is a movement of the mind towards a meditation object. That's called vitakka. However it has to appear on a sub-verbal level, just a movement, just an intention, without the mind breaking into words and labels.

The mind moves onto the object, and remember the 'object' here, the thing you are aware of, is the piti-sukha. That is why it is the main factor of this jhana, because you are aware of bliss. That's the object of your meditation, not the breath, not the body, not any words but you are aware of bliss. And you will also be aware, and this is one of the characteristics of the first jhana, that the mind will still be wobbling a little bit. The bliss which is the object of your awareness will appear, as it were, to fade or to recede, and as it fades, as it recedes, as it weakens, the mind will go towards it again. Attracted as it were, by its power, by its bliss, the mind goes towards it; that is called 'vitakka', the movement of the mind onto its object. When it reaches the object it will hold onto it, this is called 'vicira', which will be an effort of mind, but a very subtle effort of mind. This is an effort of mind; this is not an effort of will. It is not an effort coming from you, it's the mind doing it by itself. All along you are a passive observer to all of this. And as it holds onto it, eventually, as it were, it will lose its grip and will recede away from the object of bliss again. In this way, the object of bliss will appear to

be wobbly, not truly firm. As such, the mind will seem to have a little bit of width to it, but not be truly solid. However, that width is very small and you never move far away from that bliss because as soon as you move a little away from it, it retracts and pulls the mind straight back again.

Because it's only got a little bit of width this is called **one-pointedness of mind**: all of the energy, the focus, of the mind being in one point, both in space and one point in time. This experience does not change over many, many, many minutes in a full first jhana. This experience is maintained, it's just the mind going towards this bliss and this bliss lasting there for a long time. Now again, this is only how you'll see it when you emerge from the jhana. You will not be able to analyse this experience into five factors during that time because the mind will not have that width, that ability to think, the ability to analyse, while you are in the state. While in the state all you'll be aware of is just the bliss. You are literally blissed out, not really quite knowing why or what's happening, but having some sort of feeling or confidence that this is worthwhile, this is beautiful, this is profound, this is worth doing, so that you can stay in those states.

It's usual that a person's first experience of jhana will be the first jhana. After a while, the strength of the samadhi, what you actually brought into that state with you, will begin to decline and the mind will move away from the bliss, and the vitakka will not be strong enough to take it back into it again, and you emerge from the jhana. The jhana will break up and you will be able to think and analyse again. Thoughts will come up into your mind and this will probably be one of the first things which arises after the jhana breaks, as it were. The mind will still have a lot of happiness and bliss to it but will not be as one-pointed. The body will usually not be recognised at the beginning and only later will the mind care to look and see what the body has been doing all this time.

The mind will be very powerful at this stage. You've just emerged from a jhana, you'll still have a lot of happiness and bliss and in the words of the Buddha the mind will be 'malleable', it will be 'workable'. It will be like a piece of clay which is not too wet and not too dry, which you can turn into any shape you want with ease because of the power which you invested in the mind, and that becomes the experience of the first jhana. Once you've experienced that once then it's good to find out what caused that jhana to arise. What did you do? Or more appropriately, what did you let go of, to give rise to that jhana? Rather than what you did, what you let go of becomes a much more powerful indicator of the ways into these states. You usually find out that you developed that second stage when you started to let go of this 'controller', let go of the wandering mind, let go of the fear of these states and especially when you let go of the controller and just allowed the mind to show its face when you're not there, giving all the orders. Once you start to get to know this and get to know the ways into these jhanas, then you should try and develop them, to repeat them again and again because not only are you developing insight, you are developing the skill, the skill of letting go of things which are the causes of deep attachment.

As you develop these jhanas more and more, they are very enjoyable things to develop. Sometimes people feel that a holy life, a spiritual practice should be harsh and severe. If you want to make it harsh and severe that's up to you, but if you want to go on a happy path, a path of bliss which is also going to lead to enlightenment at the same time, this is it. Even though these are very strong pleasures, mental pleasures, the Buddha said they are not to be feared. He said this in many places in the Suttas and there was one place, in the *Digha Nikaya*, where he told the monks: if a person develops these jhanas, makes much of them, is almost attached to them, attached to their development then there are four consequences of that attachment to that development. The word I am translating here as attachment is *anuyoga*. Our word 'yoke' comes from this word '*yoga*' which means 'tying onto'. *Anu* means 'along with' or 'tied along with' so it literally means 'practising

from the word 'yoga' which means 'yoging onto'. *Jhana* means 'along with' or 'toe along with' so literally means 'practising frequently', doing it again and again and again, what some people would interpret as 'being attached to.'

So there are four results from practising jhanas in this way, not five results, not three results, but four results. And those four results of practising jhana again and again and again are stream entry, once returner, non-returner and Arahant. The Buddha was unequivocal about this. It does not lead to more attachment to the world, it actually leads to the enlightenment experiences, to separation from the world. The way to develop them is that as you develop the first jhana more and more, you can aim towards the higher jhanas. The only way you can aim towards the higher jhanas is to do it before you enter this whole area of the mind we call the jhana realm. Because once you are in any jhana, you are stuck there and you cannot give any orders or any commands, you cannot drive your vehicle once you are in any of these absorptions. The aiming, the driving, the putting in of instructions has to be done beforehand.

It is very difficult to find similes for this. A very weak simile, but one I've used before is like someone charging into a house with four rooms and the fourth room is way down the back, the third room is just a little bit before that, the second room a bit before that and the first one is just inside the door. The floors are made out of this very, very slippery ice so you cannot make any momentum once you have got in the first door. All your momentum has to be built up from outside, so you charge the first door and if you are going very fast, you may be able to slip right through the first room and into the second room. If you are going really fast you may even get into the third room and if you are going very, very fast as you charge the front door, you may slip all the way into the fourth room. But once you are in any of these rooms you cannot add to your momentum. So the only way you can gain these deeper jhanas is, before you enter any of these states, making sure that your effort to let go, your resolve to abandon, that your desire to settle all disturbances is so strong that you settle the disturbance of this doing mind and next you settle the *vitakka-vicira*, this movement of the mind, and you settle many other things as well. The mind settles down, one thing after the other, as it goes into the deeper jhanas.

The second jhana is the first true state of samadhi because here you've settled down that which was a disturbance of the first jhana, which was a wobbling of the mind, the *vitakka-vicira* has been abandoned. So now the mind has the object of bliss firmly unified with it, and this state is one of rock-like samadhi, where there is this one object in the mind, of bliss, and there is no room in the mind at all. It is completely one-pointed, stuck solid as a rock and blissed out, so the object is not moving at all, not changing an iota, it is there one moment after another moment after another moment. Because of the solidity and stability of that state, the second jhana will last much, much longer than the first jhana; the deeper the jhanas, the longer they will last and you are usually talking in terms of hours for the second jhana, simply because it is a very solid state. Whereas the first jhana can be just for a matter of minutes, a good second jhana should be quite long -- and it is very solid. Once you are in it there is no way you can get out until the energy of that jhana just uses itself up. That's the only way, because you cannot form the resolution, "now's the time to come out." If someone calls you, you just will not hear them, if someone taps you on the shoulder, you will not recognise that, because you are completely separated from the external world. You are literally right in the centre of your mind and you cannot be contacted. Again, that second jhana, once it starts to break up, will break up into what is tantamount to first jhana then it will break out into the verbalisation of thought. You come down again.

For those who want to explore these states a lot, one important thing one can do, rather than to leave it to the momentum of your energy to quieten down your energy of samadhi, is to make resolutions before you enter these states. You just need to say to yourself, "I'll just enter the jhana for half an hour or for one hour." Because the mind is very refined in these states it will have power, your suggestion will be like programming a computer and once the hour is up, the mind will just come out of the jhanas. I can't say exactly how it works, but it does. In the same way you can go to sleep and say, "I'll wake up at three o'clock" and you do wake up at three o'clock or five minutes either side, without the use of an alarm clock. The mind, if you programme it with mindfulness, responds. And so that is a very useful way and a very good instruction; to use those resolutions so that you do not spend over long in those states when you have maybe an appointment or some things you have to do. Make a resolution first of all. However, when you are in that state, you cannot make a resolution, you cannot think, you cannot analyse. All you know is that you are blissed out, you are not quite sure what is happening and only afterwards you have the opportunity to emerge and then to analyse and to see what has gone on and why.

If one wishes to go deeper into the jhanas, then at this point one has to understand that that bliss, which is in the second jhana born of samadhi, born of full unification of mind, a bliss with a different taste, has an aspect to it which is still troublesome to the mind and that is this aspect of *piti*. This is almost like a mental excitement and that can be overcome if one aims to quieten that bliss down.

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